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# Pick It Up! Pick It Up!: The Transnational Localism of Ska

Daniel S. Traber

*Ever since its birth in the late 1950s, ska has been a genre marked by physical and cultural diasporas and an openness to borrowing from outside its origins. The history of ska travels across national borders and integrates with other musical styles, making it one of the most hybrid, transnational forms of postwar popular music. The author follows that journey through the recent third-wave phase to close with Los Skarnales, a Chicano-based ska band in Houston who meld diverse forms, including the local flavors of their neighborhood. Throughout the study an ancillary topic lies in the background: the relationship between subjectivity and community.*

Transnationalism's first lesson is that people travel, and therefore so do cultures. I will explore this through a musical form whose lines of descent are convoluted but start on a Caribbean island that knows a lot about cultural traveling. Ska is a genre that has *always* been marked by stylistic as well as national border crossing, by a willingness to borrow from outside its origins, yet without losing sight of them. This is appropriate for a musical form with its beginnings in Jamaica, a place and space formed by the mixture of African and European (British and Spanish) influences since the slave trade. The history of ska, so far, is divided into three major periods, and each epoch is marked by the act of traveling across national borders—more culturally than physically—and integrating with other musical styles, thus making ska a truly transnational style of popular music. Indeed, the “pick it up” in the title—taken from a ska band leader's common phrase for inciting musicians and dancers alike to increase the tempo—serves as a double metaphor: first for cultural travel and diaspora, the act of packing something and taking it somewhere else; and second, as a call to future generations to pick up these cultural fragments, to take them and use them.

The ska revivals must confront a predicament similar to every neo-garage rock scene through the ages: Are you roots or retro, a contributor or a copier? In either genre, roots carries less of a pejorative aura, unlike in some strains of transnationalism where the

contrast between roots and routes is marked by transition and change—that is, a state of becoming that is simply assumed by non-retro music revivalists. So we will take a twisting journey from ska's origins in Jamaican dance halls to British mod (later skinhead) fans of the sixties who celebrate it as an anti-mainstream, authentic black music; then jump to early-1980s England where ska meets seventies punk (a “white” musical form) by morphing into the Two-Tone movement; and next arrive in the United States in the 1990s to hear what is commonly called third-wave ska. This latest phase is diverse, ranging from the new traditionalism of the Slackers and the Pietasters, to the more pop-oriented sounds of No Doubt or Save Ferris, and what the Mighty Mighty Bosstones called ska-core concocted by bands grafting ska onto hardcore punk (an even “whiter” musical form). I will close with Los Skarnales in Houston, a band that creates its sound by adding local Chicano elements. Throughout this voyage, trailing behind in the background is the ancillary topic of the relationship between subjectivity and history and how an integration of others into an identity offers a different model of community. Many of these musicians accept limits being placed upon their identities as artists and individuals, yet they create new identities through a curious in-betweenness that draws on specific musical histories and aesthetic ancestries, thereby bestowing a level of authority on a community identity even as they push beyond its influences.

Nearly every recent study of ska touches on its transnational character right out of the gate, even if it doesn't use the word, because transnationalism's subject consists of the processes of circulation and flow in conjunction with the effects of cultural contact and migration in order to reimagine national boundaries, and thus also cultural ones, “as complex, ever-shifting, and historically contingent” (Levander and Levine 400). American studies' turn to transnationalism, or hemispheric studies, begins in the 1980s with post-colonial critiques of nations as capitalist constructs “based on imperial or neocolonial forms of economic exploitation” (Bauer 236). In the United States the focus has been placed on weakening the national label of American as belonging exclusively to the United States, as well as on charting how the intersecting lines of influence make it difficult to conclusively attach a static, exceptionalist notion of “American” to the literature and arts that may come out of this country but are less rooted in a singularized paradigm of national influence. Claire F. Fox claims “the U.S. and its place in the world can be understood more fully through an appreciation of inter-American dynamics . . . [t]he new spatial lexicon of hubs, borders, Americas, and hemispheres . . . displays a preference for terms that connote transit, commerce, and dynamism” (Fox 639–43). Such a polycentric perspective raises questions about purist myths of origin—a point quite relevant to historicizing ska. My stopping in the United States does not mark an end to the journey—it does not intend to place the United States at the center of the plurality that today marks ska as a *world* music.<sup>1</sup>

Scholars of transnationalism and postnationalism commonly speak of community identity and a sense of unity being born from shared histories through the example of pan-racial groups (Huhndorf 376). Third-wave ska does this on the level of a shared *aesthetic* history, but it eliminates any cohesive, singular racial identity—including any legacy of violence and forced alterity associated with it—as being the primary unifying

factor. There is a risk that something born from a transnationalist gesture is deployed to enact a new nationalist perspective, but it is a mistake of essentialist totalization to dismiss all post-Jamaican ska since the sixties as a white-washing or bleaching of that history. Paul Gilroy asks, “How are we to think critically about artistic products and aesthetic codes which, though they may be traceable back to one distinct location, have been changed either by the passage of time or by their displacement, relocation, or dissemination through networks of communication and cultural exchange?” (Gilroy, *Black Atlantic* 80). Many post-Jamaican ska bands, as well as their fans, show knowledge of and respect for the music’s island roots without letting themselves become obsequious to it, an appropriate response from all who interact with an aesthetic form to which they have no “blood” claim. Paul Jay adds to Gilroy’s theory:

[O]ne’s roots are always so highly mediated by the social and cultural discourses growing out of the routes one’s experience takes that the whole notion of roots really turns out to be illusory . . . . [S]ubjectivity is always going to be marked by the *intrusion* of one culture into another, the infusion of elements of multiple cultures into others, and a consequent *disjunction* that is going to produce hybrid cultural forms and subjectivities. (Jay 190)

In its origination phase, ska must be classified as Jamaican because it is *their* form, it is made from the sources they chose and melded in a specific way. But beyond the fact of a national birthplace, the notion of community and blood is expanded via aesthetics to exceed soil in an ever-widening series of rhizomorphic contact lines that may never actually be physical; hence, the meaning of the music being transported across all those time zones necessarily contains a multiplicity of meaning; likewise, the experiences informing it cannot be condensed into a singular vision. But ska was already bigger than its home due to how it mixed the local with the foreign.

We cannot overlook how the Caribbean, like ska, tends to be characterized as a geographical area and cultural idea born of a syncretism informing not just its music but its language and religion (see Benítez Rojo; and Dash). The 145-mile island in the Caribbean Sea called Jamaica bears this out as an example of both positive and negative forms of transnationalism. Christopher Columbus lands in 1494, bringing Spanish colonial rule and the near extermination of the Arawak Indians from disease and hard labor, until the British take over in 1655 and begin the importation of West African slaves to work the sugar cane plantations. Complete independence from England was officially achieved on August 5, 1962. By then Jamaica still exported sugar and bananas, but during the 1950s these were less relevant to the government than bauxite mining (for aluminum) and promoting tourism. The island enjoyed an increase in employment until 1957 but at the expense of farmland sold to foreign companies for mining or hotel construction. The population of Kingston increased as “around 300,000 people were forced to move in order to create 10,000 new jobs” (Bradley 14). Those displaced from the country entered the city hoping to find jobs (of which there are never enough) or just a change. There was new public housing being constructed, but the city wasn’t prepared for this level of urban migration; thus,

the extreme poor were forced to live in Trench Town, a collection of squatter camps and open sewers. Separation of the classes became more severe, so that uptown and downtown classification carried serious distinctions about one's life chances and extended to establishing one's authenticity in the local music scene. This is part of the environment that fuels ska, which was initially disparaged as a downtown music hopelessly inferior to higher European-based forms. In this sense, "Ska may have sounded happy, but it also expressed a musical angst . . . the first form of a popular protest music . . . against social and political conditions in Jamaica" (King 4; also see Heathcott 185, 191).

Ska has its deepest roots in the social and cultural significance of the highly competitive sound system business in 1950s Jamaica. A sound system is a mobile disc jockey set-up with booming speakers for playing records at dance halls and large lawn parties that were all-night neighborhood events. These fostered a sense of community and localism nurtured by people cheering for their favorite DJ, the most popular of whom became Kingston celebrities. The fame of the sound system operators was partly based on the uniqueness of the songs they played; hence they scratched off record labels to protect their "trade secrets" from competitors' spies. During and after World War II, American soldiers and sailors brought in the R&B records the island fans craved for money or trade in marijuana, resulting in what could be viewed as a double colonial presence of military and cultural influence (Heathcott 191). The practice continued in the 1950s with merchant seamen, but some DJs would go on their own record-buying trips in America.

With the rise of rock and roll, the flow of American R&B and jazz records dwindled alongside a diminished presence on the American radio stations the island could pick up. According to Julian Jingles, the hybridity which induces ska's birth in 1959/1960 can be traced to a self-conscious investment in authentic blackness (an unintentionally ironic gesture through a transnationalist lens). Jingles claims that rock and roll was rejected by Jamaicans because it was associated with white tastes. The Jamaicans' influences, from big band (Count Basie and Duke Ellington) to bebop jazz (especially horn players) and rhythm and blues acts (Fats Domino, Louis Jordan and Roscoe Gordon), had to find an outlet, and this prompted some of the DJs to produce their own records with local musicians. Additionally, an economic recession in the late 1950s made imported records a luxury purchase beyond the means of most fans, so Jamaicans making "pop" music with a local flavor happened in order to satiate the dance-hall fans' lust for new music, especially for those who couldn't afford record players or radios (Heathcott 191; Kauppila 80).

In that spirit, Clement "Coxsone" Dodd, one of the most popular sound system operators and a burgeoning record producer, joined forces with bandleader Cluett Johnson and guitarist Ernie Ranglin around 1959, and the three developed their own local sound by combining American R&B and jazz with the indigenous folk sound of mento, a Jamaican version of calypso which uses guitar, shakers or hand drums, a rumba box, and emphasizes the upstroke (even though mento is actually already a hybrid of African rhythm and European melodies [Kauppila 76]). Ranglin comments

on the cultural borrowing of early ska: “Coxsone didn’t set out to deliberately corrupt the R&B that was being played. He wanted to stick with that sound, but to do it with our Jamaican feeling. His philosophy was that there’s the same four beats in the bar and it just depends on what we do with them” (quoted in Bradley 53). Not moving too far afield from the source material will prove to be the method for all the ska revivals to come and will be how certain bands distinguish themselves within every new revisioning of the genre.

There is no agreement on who “started” ska or how it got its name, but it was all happening at the same time mainly because the record producers were using many of the same local musicians who gradually fine-tuned the sound. The synthesis between America and Jamaica was achieved by “the drum coming in on the 2nd and 4th beats, and the guitar emphasizing the up of the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th beats. The drum therefore is carrying the blues and swing beats of the American music, and the guitar expressing the mento sound” (Jingles). Paul Kauppila describes it as “emphasizing the ‘and’ in a ‘one-AND-two-AND-three-AND-four’ rhythm pattern. It is these heavily accented ‘offbeats’ [rather than the typical emphasis being put on the downbeat] that give Jamaican popular music its unique bouncy, choppy feel” (75; also see King 203). Rhythm guitar provides the song’s essential engine of syncopation, what Dick Hebdige depicts as “a kind of jerky shuffle . . . with the treble turned right up” (“Reggae” 142). The other fundamental element, after the piano and upright bass, is a horn section (trumpet, saxophone, trombone) that either builds off the base provided by the guitar (“Nimble Foot Ska,” The Skatalites) or may accentuate the syncopated rhythm with its own take on the offbeat (“Roll on Sweet Don [Heaven and Hell],” Don Drummond and Roland Alphonso). Bradley credits this detail with giving the music a sense of national pride with fans, for “shifting the accent in this manner was enough to make the music stand out in a way that nearly all Jamaicans could identity [it] as theirs” (Bradley 52). By 1961, ska was the dominant musical sound at the Kingston dances; everything else was relegated to being the old thing.

The decision to make an inverse of R&B breaks with a cultural influence even as it is appropriated. It hardly seems coincidental that such a spirit would exist, considering that Jamaica won its full independence from England in 1962, so a rigid sense of respect or indebtedness, be it social or cultural, to all the sources was already thin. To create a staccato, up-tempo music for the sound system dances, Dodd and Johnson turned to local session players familiar with the varied foundational forms, several of whom would eventually name themselves the Skatalites and become the band that defines the sound of early ska. More significantly, these performers fall under Hebdige’s surplus taxonomy of ska sources that integrated local Rasta and Burru drumming rhythms—another celebrity DJ named Prince Buster can take credit for getting the Rasta drummer Count Ossie to play on “Oh Carolina”—which marks them as less commercial performers, in contrast to those who made a cleaned-up, “respectable” ska for tourists and for export to white consumers looking to dance to a friendly, exotic music akin to calypso (Hebdige, *Cut* 58, 65). A watered-down version of ska was mass-marketed, and it worked, but due in part to the emigration of



Jamaicans to England (including ska musicians, such as the trombone player Rico Rodriguez).

During the early sixties, ska (also called blue beat in those days, after a UK record label) was a success in England across racial and class lines. In fact, more Jamaican émigrés in England bought the records than the people back home (Hebdige, "Reggae" 144). Not only did Jamaicans in England find a taste of home in the music, but it also helped to create a sense of identity in a land that had recruited them to enter but wasn't doing much to make them feel welcome—two race riots in 1958 and low-level employment made complete assimilation less appealing, although they did find a level of empathy with Irish immigrants who were treated similarly (Bradley 117). Lacking the same kind of concentrated immigrant base, ska never found a similar level of success in the United States, where Motown reigned as the "black" pop music. However, in 1964 a contingent of ska artists sent to represent Jamaica to potential tourists and investors at the World's Fair in New York (backed by the Dragonnaires, an uptown hotel act chosen for their tourist-friendly sound and clean appearance) alongside the massive success of Millie Small's cover of "My Boy Lollipop" temporarily put ska on an international stage.<sup>2</sup>

Included among these enthusiastic shoppers were mods, a predominantly white working-class British subculture that preferred Motown and Tamla to what they considered the simplistic savagery of fifties rock and roll. Mod acceptance was the "greatest boost to the music's British presence" (Bradley 148). Paul Gilroy hails the white mods' acceptance of ska as a part of "the history of how popular culture has formed spaces in which the politics of 'race' could be lived out and transcended in the name of youth" (an achievement he also attributes to the mixed-race UK bands enacting the late 1970s ska revival; see Gilroy, "Diaspora" 346, 348).

What I find more striking is how mods are the perfect consumers for a hybrid music that reversed its source material. In their pursuit of contemporary sophistication, style and looking "smart" (as opposed to the sloppy, greasy appearance of rockers and, later, hippies), early mods appropriated the look of affluence but undermined it by choosing the sleek lines of shiny Italian mohair suits and sporting short haircuts designed to be fashionable rather than respectable. Sixties mod culture in England was already a mixed form that "blended the continental style of bebop-loving Modernists, the showmanship of American Rock and Roll and Soul performers, the expressive energies of R&B, the enterprising spirit of the lower-middle class, and the Art Schoolinfluenced aesthetization of everyday life" along with sartorial elements taken from pop-art symbolic imagery and American preppy style of the late fifties and early sixties (Feldman 24; Marsh and Gaul 1225). Their sleek look and lifestyle based on speed—provided by their Vespa scooters and amphetamines—all-night clubbing and adoration of the superficial and transient was not an attempt to mirror those who had better jobs and life chances; instead, it became a weapon against the soul-dragging boredom and inevitability of the English class system. Thus, the idea of drawing from seemingly disparate forms and manipulating them to your own needs links the mods and ska. So does their investment in positioning the music within the framework of

black racial authenticity. This is what added to its anti-mainstream aura as ska was ignored by the major labels and BBC radio.

It should, then, make utter sense that working-class skinheads come to adopt ska as their official soundtrack in the late sixties. While the rest of the world was fascinated with long-haired hippies, these holdovers from the mod subculture (first called hard mods) were sticking with ska and building their identity upon seeing themselves as the representatives of traditional proletarian values and culture. Their fandom was reciprocated by bands releasing songs with skinhead in the title, the most famous being Symarip's "Skinhead Moonstomp" (Marshall 26). Their affection for the Jamaican music was not the result of a fad perpetuated on duped consumers by manipulative record labels, at least no more than any fan can be tricked into buying more products they already want. On the contrary, ska was seen as a part of the skinheads' cultural inheritance from the mods. This is before they became involved in the swastika-waving National Front street marches of the late seventies; nonetheless, the contradiction is quite thick, given that skinheads were known throughout England for their racism and violence toward non-white immigrants. Their anger came down especially hard on Indians and Pakistanis, whom they considered less assimilated than the second generation West Indians they interacted with in the schools, dance halls and neighborhood streets, and from whom the skinheads took much of their fashion and musical cues.<sup>3</sup>

The white skinhead's allegiance to a closed notion of Britishness is a romanticized gesture as well as a defensive move against a changing world, yet one given angles by the paradox of simultaneously holding an ideology able to demarcate good and bad immigrants even as they are consciously influenced by a non-white immigrant culture. They weren't all racists, and there were black skinheads, so while the interaction hardly constitutes an idyllic interracial hybridity, it isn't a purist's singularity either, as mod style is combined with fashion elements associated with the British working man—thick-soled boots, suspenders and durable clothing—alongside fragments borrowed from South London Jamaican "rude boys," such as porkpie hats and trousers cut above the ankle (Hebdige, "Reggae" 148).<sup>4</sup> The fact that a part of the home culture is being rejected for something "foreign," that the parents' Other is now used by their children to define and publicly display themselves, won't bring an end to racism in England, yet neither should it be facilely denigrated as white kids simply trying, once again, to appropriate the coolness of black marginality—especially given the anti-immigrant violence enacted by the working-class Teddy Boys subculture against West Indians in the fifties.

Two ska songs belatedly made it into the UK charts in 1967 (Prince Buster's "Al Capone" and the Skatalites' "Guns of Navarone"), but by the mid-sixties the sound of ska had already been slowing down in Jamaica to take the form of rocksteady (replacing the previous R&B influence with Motown and Stax soul). The next step was to slow things down a little more in the early phase of "pop" reggae, which evolved in the early 1970s into a bass-heavy style "roots" reggae with Afrocentric themes which alienated the white skinhead audience. Meanwhile, some Jamaican sound engineers



like King Tubby and Lee “Scratch” Perry had begun “versioning” rocksteady songs into dub tracks by applying multiple layers of effects such as reverb and echo. It would take a postpunk mod revival in 1979 to instigate ska’s return to England.

It was called Two Tone and constituted a unified cultural movement for roughly five years, during which it was surprisingly quite successful. That key bands like the Specials, the Beat and the Selecter were biracial helped to spread a sound and stylistic iconography (namely, black-and-white checkerboard on *everything*) predicated on racial tolerance. George Marshall speculates on the social effect of racially mixed bands: “There could be no better advert for racial harmony than seeing black and white faces on stage together, and particularly when that stage was television and reaching millions of homes. Maybe a lot of skins were NF [National Front] at the time, but without 2 Tone you can bet your last pound coin that thousands more would have been” (Marshall 95). The idea of racial harmony and hybridity was obvious with the biracial bands, but even the all-white Madness delivered a version of that message simply by turning to ska as a cultural source.

But it was a return to fun that was the very first order of Two Tone; thus, the music was driven by “a consumer demand for a sound that came out of punk but was . . . above all danceable. The postpunk vanguard . . . made music for ‘heads’ at home, not bodies on the [dance] floor” (Reynolds 227). Jerry Dammers, leader of the Specials and mastermind of the Two-Tone style, philosophy and record label, speaks of initially trying to meld heavy reggae with the far more frantic tempo of punk as a way to unite two of Britain’s rebel subcultures. Unfortunately, he couldn’t make it work because the styles were so different, so he turned to ska’s staccato rhythm guitar style to suture punk’s whiteness with ska’s blackness (Heylin 513). In the midst of the 1979 mod revival fueled by the release of the film *Quadrophenia*, using Jamaican ska avoided the monolithic stasis of nationalistic baggage associated with the new uniformity of scooter boys wearing oversized army parkas. According to Clinton Heylin, “Ska had nothing like the reactionary connotations of Britpop [e.g. the Jam’s neo-mod Union Jacks], perhaps because it had never really broken out of that [sixties-era] sub-culture, and therefore was ripe for reprocessing in an increasingly multicultural Britain” (Heylin 514).

London would be the first choice for an example of cosmopolitan England, but Two Tone was born in industrial cities like Birmingham and Coventry (UK’s Detroit), places known for racial diversity and the cultural exchange that comes from a tradition of “black and white musicians intermingling” (Reynolds 229). The Two Tone sound shares elements with sixties soul and garage rock by integrating the Hammond organ with ska’s horns and staccato guitar and then adding a punk aesthetic by increasing the tempo. “Rather than meticulously re-creating a single, specific genre, 2-Tone sifted through pop’s archives and mixed and matched elements of different styles—ska, Northern soul, easy listening, rockabilly—along with flavors from contemporary music such as disco and dub” (Reynolds 245).

Unlike punk, Two Tone didn’t shun its ancestors or deny their indebtedness to a historical legacy and an expanding, concentric sense of community linked through music and fashion that could reach across the ocean, across race and across blood.

Instead, it resurrected a combination of the mod and rude boy look, played with original musicians like Rico Rodriguez and covered songs from the 1960s; for example, the Specials recorded the Skatalites' "Guns of Navarone" and Dandy Livingstone's "Rudy, A Message to You," and from Prince Buster, the Beat did "Rough Rider" while Madness, of course, released "Madness." This is not to suggest that the revival had no forward momentum, for every time Two Tone looked back it also took the past a step forward. The Specials branched out considerably from ska by turning to varied musical forms on their second release, *More Specials*, in 1980. The Beat were especially adept at using ska as a jumping-off point without being tethered to the ground by it. On their first album they were already bending the genre and carving their own path away from it to have a less strictly revivalist staccato sound as well as allowing the saxophone to soar as a central rather than a backing instrument, later letting it bleat in a light free-jazz style on "Rotating Heads." But the Two-Tone party was well over by 1983 as bands split up and consumers grew up, or just moved on to the next new thing.

Two Tone traveled across the Atlantic as bands toured the United States—the Specials even performed on *Saturday Night Live*—but it never achieved a response as widespread or fervent as in England. It would take nearly a decade for ska to have a wider presence in America that would allow people above the underground to hear it. New York's the Toasters began in 1981 as Two-Tone's American standard bearer and continue doing so to this day. The Untouchables and Fishbone are two early California outfits that integrated ska into their eclectic styles, but it was neither the sole nor the central ingredient in every song. Curiously, Fishbone's career trajectory may allow some insight into the marketing predicament of hybrid music, raising questions about the role of racial identity. The band's energetic cocktail of ska, funk, punk, and metal makes them an outlier group, one existing beyond the standard industry categories, that became trapped within a niche of critical adoration and cult status but was denied long-term commercial success. Does a systemic racism in both the industry and consumers explain why Fishbone didn't become massive stars like their fellow funk-punks the Red Hot Chili Peppers? Are whites allowed the freedom to be eclectic while non-whites—cast as simultaneously neither black nor white enough—must obey essentialist conceptions of race-appropriate musical conventions to "make it"? It is difficult to say because Fishbone is hardly an unknown entity in that they toured nationally and had MTV videos and an album that reached number 49 on the *Billboard* 200 in 1991; they even appeared in the 1987 movie *Back to the Beach* (covering "Jamaica Ska" with Annette Funicello) and performed on *Saturday Night Live*. So the answer may actually lie in the exact way they pushed the boundaries and the unwillingness of most people, of any race or class or gender, to enter musical border zones where the expectations are twisted too far. No American ska band was ruling the record charts in the eighties, and by the time of third wave in the mid-nineties it may simply have been too late for Fishbone, even if it hadn't been for the fact that their progress was interrupted when the bassist was charged with kidnapping their mentally unstable guitarist, in addition to a cycle of bandmates quitting,

rejoining, requitting. Yet this is all compounded by their musical weirdness compared with mainstream bands, ska or otherwise; hence, it was *always* unlikely that Fishbone would find a huge market for their sound beyond the core fans. One should also keep in mind that it takes a single hand to count the number of ska bands since the very beginning who became rich and famous *and* were able to maintain it after the fad(s) burned out.

The third-wave explosion brings ska full circle as a product of the Black Atlantic, Paul Gilroy's term for the cultural exchange that has occurred since slavery. As a music initially created against American rock, ska was about to make peace with it by being fused with the fastest and least funky variant of rock created up to that time. For all the nods to punk rock, most of the Two-Tone catalog actually didn't do much toward breaking the sound barrier as was happening at this time in America with hardcore bands, although hardcore's flat, practically unchanging rhythm isn't the proper beat for skanking on the dance floor, so the next phase would need to address both issues. Ska's so-called third wave in the United States increases the tempo more than Two Tone bands while still maintaining a danceable rhythmic foundation, but it also critiques essentialism without having to utter the word. For those who want music to perform double duty as an exclusionary marker of racial authenticity (read: ontological purity), Gilroy calls attention to how syncretic musical forms treat the source material as something to be

deliberately reconstructed in novel patterns that do not respect their originators' proprietary claims or the boundaries of discrete nation states and the supposedly natural political communities they express or simply contain ... continually confound[ing] any simplistic (essentialist or anti-essentialist) understanding of the relationship between racial identity and racial non-identity, between folk cultural authenticity and pop cultural betrayal. (Gilroy, *Black Atlantic* 989)

United States ska had survived through the eighties, but hardly anyone knew it was around. In the early nineties, the media universe was dominated by the darker mood of grunge rock, as represented by bands like Nirvana and Pearl Jam, in conjunction with the Generation X victim discourse. So there were few takers for ska's upbeat party music—even the hip-hop market had the occasional grunge or metal crossover recording. The small audiences and lack of major record deals kept ska underground, a truly independent scene with its own audience and performance network like American punk/hardcore a generation earlier, until a mid-decade rise in popularity coaxed it into the daylight. *Billboard* magazine and *Details* were declaring ska the next big thing (notably, *Billboard's* enthusiasm for ska's prospects on January 15, 1994 had dissipated almost two years later in the November 18, 1995 issue). The multi-headed beast marketed as alternative music during this period (the same way anything slightly outside the mainstream was labeled “college” or “modern” rock in the 1980s) opened a door to acknowledgment for many bands, although only a handful achieved success, and even fewer received the massive airplay of ska-based acts like No Doubt and Sublime.

The diverse set of bands herded under the third-wave ska moniker, a not insignificant number of them multi-racial (necessitating Two-Tone's checkerboard imagery become more variegated than a mere black-and-white pattern), were spread across the country. California had the highest per capita rate, but large pockets also existed in the Midwest and Northeast. Some groups played a more traditional style rooted in the sixties, and resurrected the rude-boy look (the same one mimicked by skinheads twenty years ago and recycled only a decade earlier by Two-Tone fans), while others broke with obeying hard-and-fast rules about how to use ska as a music, an identity or a lifestyle. As concerns fashion, the majority weren't purist about a ska uniform, with many performers dressing, for the most part, like sloppy alternative-rock fans in jeans and T-shirts. Let's Go Bowling's David Weins comments on the changing attitude:

The audience has become such a mix of traditional/skinheads, skate kids, mods, and older people that the fashion in the 3rd Wave seems to have been sidelined . . . . I actually like this ska audience better than years past. Each person seems to be more secure in their individuality . . . . They are strictly there for the music. In years past, if you didn't wear the right clothes or fit the right image, then it was more than likely that you would get a dirty look or be confronted. (Quoted in Brown and Phyllipz)

Musically, the performers applied a similar logic to the choices they made in their sonic alchemy. Jeff Baker, a New York musician in the '90s, remarks, "One of the strengths of ska is that the foundation is so simple but so effective that it can endure a lot of changes but still maintain a relationship to the original style" (quoted in Strauss 139). Contra the new traditionalists, others filtered ska through pop and hardcore punk or added unique elements specific to their local cultures or just their personal tastes. There were definitely those who shared the opinion of Noah Wildman, a key figure in the New York scene (until accused of embezzling Moon Ska NYC Records in 1999), who frames non-trad third-wave bands as "rais[ing] the frightening specter of a day when ska does not resemble ska anymore" (Wildman 141). He's not entirely wrong, but to see it as a problem depends on your expectations, definitional parameters, and willingness to hypocritically ignore how ska was born as an utterly hybrid music. Those who seek sanctuary by freezing ska within a past form miss the underlying message of transformational fluidity in the rhizomorphic music they claim to protect.

At the end of the eighties, Operation Ivy from Berkeley set the basic model other bands would follow in songs like "Sound System" and "Artificial Life"—namely, keeping the upstroke technique and syncopated chukka-chukka guitar, the bouncy rhythms and jumpy brass section for bands with horns (notably, ska and the concurrent swing craze allowed the marching band kids to finally be cool), but making it all harder and faster in accordance with a hardcore punk aesthetic. To some degree, all the non-trad bands associated with the third wave take the tempo past the line set by Two Tone in the previous decade: from the harder bands like the Suicide Machines and Buck-O-Nine to the medium rock style of Goldfinger, Reel Big Fish,

and Mustard Plug, to the lighter, pop approach of Save Ferris or the quirky persona of the Aquabats (who dress like henchmen from the 1960s *Batman* TV show). One problem, however, is that some groups had a tendency to switch between the two styles in a song rather than melding the forms beyond adding background horns. Link 80 is such an offender, but Florida's Less than Jake is one of the finer examples of a group who can add melody and rhythm to a hardcore sound while successfully meshing its energy with ska instrumentation. The growth of third-wave ska in the 1990s was astounding; indeed, there were so many bands I have, by necessity, skipped over many other examples and the specific nuances their approaches contributed to the third-wave sound. Unfortunately, as with any artistic movement, clichés start to multiply, overwhelm, and dissipate the thing that once promised a fresh perspective so as to escape cliché. According to Lorraine Muller, "Ska strangled itself with over-saturation. Every week for over two years in New York you could find at least ten ska shows to go to within a four or five-mile radius, and that's just too much for an underground music" (quoted in Lejtenyi).

The other common criticism leveled against third wave at the time was on the grounds of commercialism—that ska's underground bona fides, its authenticity, was being lost (some self-aware bands commented on this in songs and videos) as the peppy music became the soundtrack for commercials and the theme song of *America's Funniest Home Videos*. The grumblers' complaint would soon be handed a resolution: by the millennium, mainstream interest had disappeared and bands returned below ground once audiences got bored with too much sameness and the record labels stopped calling. As to the criticism about third-wave not being "real" ska, one can only answer affirmatively. It is not the same because the ingredients in the recipe have changed on the basis of which musical community is given more emphasis. In the sixties, the Jamaicans initiated an act of cultural borrowing that used American R&B and jazz, but made their own cultural/musical traditions the more prominent component, thus creating what *became* ska. The original form was running away from rock and roll; this time around, the non-trad third-wave bands reverse that in letting their rock and pop influences affect tempo, volume, and their typically more brash, energetic approach to the music and performance.

Their mash-up of musical histories, traditions, and styles is a metaphor for treating community and history as malleable facets of an identity. The lesson is really no different in practice from what is on display with the original Jamaicans and Two-Tone Britons; the difference lies in what is created being cast as different because it does not replicate those forms; it only uses them as a beginning foundation. Every node in ska's history, every arrival and departure that leads to border-crossing—be it cultural, national, generic, personal, sartorial, etc.—serves to bracket all the categorical names attached to the elements musicians and fans incorporate into their versions of ska. Americanists working in transnationalism like to place ironic quotation marks around "America"; ska reminds us that those marks should accompany everything we use to organize and represent the world. For "ska," this would partially include "black" and "white," "Jamaica" and "England" and "America," "rhythm and blues" and "punk" and

“hardcore” and “pop” and “rock” and everything else that has been used to shape the music, the clothes, the dance, the attitude, the politics, the imagery, and so forth. Ideas may arrive in a singular, dominant form—with our reception initially controlled by a single, dominant meaning—but they are changed through contact and move on to the next act of synthesis and suture that keeps reinventing the form. While the denaturalization of terms or the concepts attached to them via border crossing is not inherently subversive—multinational corporations try to do away with borders and their protective legal restrictions every day—it still remains an act driven by the intention to see beyond the limits created for us, imposed against us in creating an identity as well as music.

In this light, I want to conclude by considering Los Skarnales, a band from Houston that formed in 1995 to play their own brand of borderland ska. Like the other third-wavers, they build upon a ska foundation with touches of rock and punk, but add pieces of their local cultural traditions in order to broaden the layers of their sound through a multiplicity that never fails to sound cohesive in spite of the swirling *mélange* of different genres; in fact, the band’s talent at bringing them together makes the differences seem far less unusual and more quotidian in the sense that this should be the model for our personal soundtracks. The bandleader Felipe Galvan attributes deep Chicano roots to the band without letting them tie down the music with a monoculturalist expression of those sources.<sup>5</sup> Galvan explains: “Back in the ’40s, the word *pachuco* was about the young Mexican-Americans getting influenced by the American culture and combining it together . . . . They were outcasts in both cultures, so they had to create their own little [hybrid] subculture” (Lomax).

The *pachuco* was born in the bordertown zone of El Paso/Ciudad Juárez (there is even a statue memorializing the *pachuco* in Juárez), which explains why cultural mixture is the strategy by which this dandy figure “disrupts national narrativity with hybrid performances of the self” (Kun 199). It also accounts for why the *pachuco* has consistently been associated with gang culture and was framed within a moral panic discourse during the June 1943 Los Angeles Zoot Suit Riots, when sailors and police attacked *pachucos* verbally and physically for being unpatriotic (read: unassimilated). The *pachucos* borrowed their zoot suit fashion from African-American hipsters and musicians; the latter were also a source for what came to be called “*pachuco boogie*,” a form of boogie woogie (or jump blues) fused with Latin rhythms as practiced by Don Tosti and Lalo Guerrero after World War II. Los Skarnales acknowledge this history and extend their congenial appropriation of black-based subculture by exposing the *pachuco*’s affinities with the 1960s Jamaican rude boys—which the band transforms into *vatos rudos* with the imagery of lowriders and zoot-suited barrio hipsters—not so much as straight-up criminals, but in terms of being a working-class youth subculture invested in a unique style of fashion and music used to publicly represent the band’s identity.<sup>6</sup>

The band proves itself an example of Jean-Luc Nancy’s theory of the singular plural subject:



The singular is primarily *each* one and, therefore, also *with* and *among* all the others. The singular is a plural . . . . [Being] is always an instance of “with”: singulars singularly together, where the togetherness is neither the sum, nor the incorporation, nor the “society,” nor the “community.” The togetherness of singulars is singularity “itself.” It “assembles” them insofar as it spaces them; they are “linked” insofar as they are not unified. (Nancy, *Being* 32, 33).

Marie-Eve Morin explains, “Nancy’s singular plural does not only mean that there is always a plurality of singularities; it means first and foremost that a singularity is itself always plural or multiple. There are singular differences in that which we call ‘identity,’ but those differences, or this plurality within singularity, does not prevent identification from taking place.” Los Skarnales achieve this by bringing together their disparate tastes. Galvan offers a partial catalog: “My influence is everything from Mexican and American culture; Chris brings out more of that rock and roll edge; Ryan on the organ is into a lot of ska and reggae and rocksteady. And the accordion player is into a lot of old-school *conjunto*. Nick is into a lot of jump blues, kind of a jump jive thing with his bass” (Lomax). Amid the bilingual lyrics on their 2004 album *Pachuco Boogie Sound System*, one can also dig out the fragments, hints or complete compositions using mento, Cajun zydeco, rockabilly, Mexican *danzón* (by way of Cuba), and Jamaican toasting by the reggae rapper Ragah El.

The band shows its broad range with tracks like the oi-chanting, full-bore barroom rocker “Vatos Rudos” balanced against “Demasiado Tarde” using a ska-guitar infrastructure underneath an energetic Tex-Mex *conjunto* style with the accordion placed out front (all unexpectedly punctuated near the end with a flash of ’50s guitar riff that adds another flavor, another style, another *time period* to the song). Yet it is “I’m Sorry” that stands out as the showcase of their ability to appropriate and synthesize nearly all their influences into a third-space sound of localized transnationalism. The song begins with a modern rock guitar introduction; suddenly there is the hard-plucking rockabilly and/or jump blues rhythm of a slap bass; the drums enter as Galvan jumps in with a long-trilling hard *R* on the word “right,” which leads to a garage and/or ska-organ sound joining alongside a *conjunto* and/or *tejano* accordion (an instrument that arrived in Texas during the mid-1800s with the waltz- and polka-playing German immigrants). About a half minute into the song the very quick ska rhythm is established as the song’s foundation upon which Galvan sings, chants, yells as he switches between Spanish and English, until a little after two minutes. At this point everything slows down to a syrupy reggae rhythm over which Ragah El and Galvan take turns toasting in English and Spanish (highlighting sonic similarities between the trilling patois). “I’m Sorry” is constructed by applying musical layers with no clear national, historical or cultural trajectory that could possibly tie them *all* cleanly together. But now they are intertwined—as sound, as culture—because this band forces seemingly disparate parts into making cohesive sense.

Nick Gaitan, the upright bass player, frankly rejects being contained by a singular culture or language: “This music is more of a world-music sound than that of a Spanish rock sound. Urban life with world music, it does mix . . . . I don’t think that

we are so much a part of the *rock en español* ‘movement.’ I don’t understand why rock would be classified by the language it is sung in” (Burr). Gaitan is referring to a movement in the 1980s and 1990s when Latin American bands, many from Mexico, sang Spanish lyrics over music influenced by US rock and pop, some adding local forms like Mexican folk or salsa to the mix. In contrast to Gaitan’s negative response, Josh Kun enthusiastically claims *rock en español* is a transnational “challenge [to] the commonsense sound of the United States as ‘America’ and refuse[s] American identities based in rooted, singular national territories and absolutist racial and ethnic formations” (Kun 185). Gaitan’s comment suggests a critical view of *rock en español* as a term that functions to limit and control creativity.

He is wrong and right; wrong for overlooking the use of local, non-American elements as a statement on traveling across cultural and national lines—what Kun characterizes as “disrupt[ing] the nationalized borders of a singing America by questioning the one-to-one equivalencies of music, nation, and culture” (Kun 186)—since that is a message easily ascribed to Los Skarnales’ work. On the other hand, Gaitan is right in focusing on the tricky irony of using language to name a music with border-zone aspirations. The specification of language attached to the open-ended “rock” codifies and constricts more than it subverts some notion of an exclusively white/western musical form. It can be difficult to “hear” all the cultural and physical fluidity Kun ascribes these groups, or that they “deprogram the master codes,” since the generic markers of each bands’ influences—from classic rock to punk to eighties’ college rock and whatever else one finds—are so audible in their dominance (Kun 205). Hence, the only way the bands are able to make even a minor shift forward is by sounding “non-American” primarily via language—in other words, like western pop music with a different accent but still marked by a clearly bordered *national* point of origin that may be more restrictive than liberating. Ultimately, Los Skarnales’ own heavy sonic and visual reliance on references to traditional icons of Chicano culture—like pachucos, lowriders and zoot suits—can distract from their broader-minded achievement. The members come to those traditions already touched by other musical and cultural sources, so there is no starting point from purity, but I think they are self-aware in that regard. This is a blueprint for the culture of one, the sound of understanding how to live being singular plural, thereby adding to the list of ska’s bracketed concepts for which assumptions are challenged to now include (for both those who live there and those who have never visited) “Texas,” “Houston” and “chicano,” or try “young-urban-Texan-chicano.”

The band proves capable of borrowing without copying by shaping the sources to its needs—for a ska band, it is the ultimate act of mimicry that this too follows the path set down by the Jamaican players fifty years earlier. Third-wave ska opposes completely wiping away the past to make a shiny new future. The goal is not one of aspiring to absolute difference from all previous forms—cast as temporal and cultural others—like a more avant-garde music. To understand the influence of your others on your own ontological creation is more honest and possibly more complex than starting from scratch because you have to maneuver a reified musical identity. “Being cannot be

anything but being-with-one-another, circulating in the *with* and as the *with* of this singularly plural coexistence . . . . All of being is in touch with all of being, but the law of touching is separation; moreover, it is the heterogeneity of surfaces that touch each other" (Nancy, *Being* 3, 5). The larger lesson to take from third-wave ska's use of voluntary cultural history is its response to community, through that history, as a system that partly produces individuals while lacking absolute rule over them. Thus we see agency can exist within structure without our resorting to totalizing the power of either.

## Notes

- [1] Curiously, third-wave American ska occupies its own liminal space within theories of cultural sharing and/or appropriation used by transnationalist American studies. Ralph Bauer says, "[T]he comparative hemispheric (North-South) approach has often stood in opposition to the transatlantic (EastWest) or 'diasporic' models . . . the hemispheric model has often depended on assumptions of cultural creolization or acculturation due to historical experience in the frontiers or 'contact zones' of the New World, while the transatlantic has typically grounded transnational analyses on assertions of cultural retentions from the Old World to the New" (Bauer 23839). Is ska's half-century of international travel a different model? The roots in African-American popular music connect its Jamaican form to a hemispheric model, while the movement to England in the sixties and eighties then over to America in the nineties adheres more to a Black Atlantic theory where westernization of the source becomes an issue, but then there are all the bands in Asia (Tokyo Ska Paradise Orchestra) and Latin America (Argentina's Los Fabulosos Cadillacs since 1985), so the arrows are pointing everywhere. In ska, neither the sources/influences nor the new form constructed from them are free of a preceding history—pop or otherwise.
- [2] Jon Stratton's study of "My Boy Lollipop," specifically Chris Blackwell's involvement with it as the white Jewish owner of Island Records, offers a different perspective on the possible cultural politics underneath and the reasoning behind the commercial "softening" of the raw ska style favored in the Jamaican ghettos. He argues for a broadened understanding of ska that goes beyond using Jamaican blackness as the sole criterion of authenticity.
- [3] Despite making a hybrid music, ska's creators are hardly a utopian example without contradiction on racial matters. Many Chinese-Jamaicans were involved in the island's musical scene. For example, Thomas Wong is credited with developing the first sound system dances in the 1950s; however, Leslie Kong was a record store owner and music producer who some resented as an interloper on their turf (both the musical and physical territories), such that Prince Buster recorded "Black Head Chineese Man" to accuse Kong of theft (Bradley 105), and the bandleader Byron Lee received a similar racist-fueled disparagement from some participants and fans. Additionally, the key figure Don Drummond was a Rastafarian black nationalist (Bradley 101). One can understand these sentiments, given Jamaica's colonial past and the age's identity politics, including the civil rights movement in the United States, but it raises the question of early ska's lust for Jamaicanness/blackness being an essentialist move, albeit philosophically incomplete because of the rhizomorphic quality of its multiple sources, including the history of their very nationality. Paul Gilroy asks: what happens after music associated with an authentic blackness "is perceived as a world phenomenon, what value is placed upon its origins, particularly if they come into opposition against further mutations produced during its contingent loops and fractal trajectories? Where music is thought to be emblematic and constitutive of racial difference rather than just associated with it, how is music used to specify general issues pertaining to the problem of racial authenticity and the consequent self-identity of the ethnic group?" (Gilroy, *Black Atlantic* 756) The negative sixties' attitude does not carry over into the revival periods when ska's originators are supportive of new musical tributaries that are opening and very happy that the music is appreciated by an international audience (even if the white new traditionalists don't always share the sentiment).

- [4] The Jamaican rude boy figure appeared in the mid-1960s as unemployment increased and all the boosterist promises of the fifties failed to deliver: "Young, male, Un- or under-employed . . . . Anti-establishment, anti-authoritarian, antisocial, hell, even anti-each other, they had all manner of frustrations to vent . . . . By the middle of the decade, the rudies were sufficiently widespread to create serious disorder in certain areas" (Bradley 178). Dressed in slick suits, shades and porkpie hats, they put themselves on display and, given their lack of employment, the clothes declared their social deviance as criminals. They became the center of a moral panic on the island as street violence and gang activity rose. There are many ska songs written about the rudies, some celebratory—"as cultural heroes akin to American cowboys and gangsters, living on the other side of the law, challenging dominant social norms" (Heathcott 196)—and others chiding them to straighten up and stop making trouble. The look is adopted in both ska revivals until it becomes a clear demarcating uniform for the scene.
- [5] This method informs the choices of many Houston bands; see Ensminger on the Hispanic contributions to Houston's punk scene. Moreover, that we end with this specific example of cultural fusion is fitting, since some Jamaican bands drew on Latin jazz in their work. And Los Skarnales is not the only third-wave ska band to claim Mexico as a musical influence. The Voodoo Glow Skulls mixed border nationalities, but for the most part this only resulted in using Spanish lyrics or code-switching rather than developing a musical style reaching beyond the basic punk-ska approach. Others include two Midwestern bands from the *American Skathic* compilation CD series. The Adjusters' "Si Tu Luches" and "Tijuana Road" by the Articles both simulate a basic mariachi style via Spanish guitar and horns keeping the syncopated ska rhythm; the latter lets the trumpet break out on its own solo path. In August 2009, the Houston live music venue Fitzgerald's held a Latin Ska night that emphasized its variety by *not* having Los Skarnales on the bill—one assumes in order to showcase newer bands like El Tlazho and Laskaretas Buffonas. To be a Houston ska band, however, does not require you go Chicano, as evidenced by the Suspects. And forty miles south—on the way to the port city of Galveston Island, historically a hub of multiethnic immigrant traffic on the Gulf Coast—lies Texas City, a petroleum industry town, where Secret Agent 8 formed in 1996, playing more of a high-energy, horn-heavy trad and Two Tone influenced ska.
- [6] See Luis Alvarez on the zoot suit as a multiracial cultural weapon during World War II and Anthony Macías's *Mexican American Mojo* on the history of pachuco boogie as a musical form as well as an ambiguous postracial marker. Like anti-immigrant British skinheads' using immigrant music in the 1960s, the pachucos were also quite willing to use African-American fashion and music while rejecting blacks outside the dancehall.

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